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STATE FOR OES/PCI, OES/ETC, OES/ENV, AND SCA/INS  
STATE PASS TO NSF FOR INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS  
INTERIOR FOR FRED BAGLEY AND MINI NAGENDRAN

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SUBJECT: INDIAN TIGER IN A STATE OF TERMINAL EMERGENCY MADE WORSE  
BY DEPLETING FORESTS

NEW DELHI 00000614 001.2 OF 002

¶1. SUMMARY. The much awaited Tiger Census Report and the State of the Forest Report were released by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) recently. Although the Tiger census made headlines by officially recognizing the massive decline in the tiger population, it did not come as a surprise to most specialists in the field. In the wake of the media outcry following the release, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh asked all Chief Ministers to take personal charge of tiger conservation and forest management in their States. Aside from over-inflated estimates from prior censuses, habitat loss and poaching were cited as the two major factors contributing to the tiger's decline. However, equally important is the government's development first policies. END SUMMARY.

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PAPER TIGERS COUNTED NO MORE  
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¶2. It is now official that tiger numbers in India have dropped to 1411, less than half of the earlier projected estimate of over 3600. The much awaited tiger census, the first conducted using scientific methodology and in conjunction with the Wildlife Institute of India, covers the whole of the country with the exception of the Maoist-infested wildlife sanctuaries of central India and Sunderbans National Park in West Bengal where the counting has been delayed. While some of the decline can be attributed to grossly inflated prior estimates, poaching and loss of forest remain the major challenges to tiger survivability. Although the census notes the presence of some success stories such as Corbett and Ranthambore National Parks, most parks have undergone a sharp decline in numbers - most seriously at Kanha and Panna National Parks which are facing a potential total loss of tigers.

¶3. The Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007 - 2012) has allocated \$153 million for tiger conservation which will include upgrading eight protected areas to tiger reserves as well as relocating communities living inside parks. The Prime Minister reacted to the tiger census by asking the Chief Ministers of each state to take personal charge of tiger conservation and formulate State Tiger Conservation Plans that include park management, recruitment of new staff, and provision of adequate resources for state forest services. In addition, the GOI announced a ten-fold increase in the relocation package for families living inside parks from INR 100,000 (approx. USD 2,522) to INR 1,000,000 (approx. USD 25.220). The entire sum is not intended to be given directly to each family but rather to pay for all expenses associated with relocation such as transportation and housing.

¶ 4. India's tiger count and forest loss has caused justifiably anguished reactions in the press although much of the reporting on the new government initiatives to address the problem has been inaccurate. For example, all national dailies noted the creation of eight "new" tiger reserves giving the impression the GOI was setting aside new land for tigers. This is in fact not the case. MoEF's Inspector General of Wildlife, Dr. R.B. Lal clarified to Emboffs that the eight new reserves are in fact existing protected areas with indigenous tiger populations which will be reclassified as tiger reserves.

¶ 5. Former Project Tiger Director, P.K. Sen told Emboffs he believes the GOI's new plan has a few flaws and does not address all the issues. Sen commented that creating more tiger reserves will reduce already strained resources at existing reserves and believes a better approach would be to strengthen conservation efforts at existing tiger reserves. Sen also noted a major hurdle that was not addressed was the manner in which GOI funding for tiger and wildlife conservation is allocated. The GOI provides funding directly to state governments for conservation but substantial sums are diverted at the state level to unrelated projects and also to the payment of state government salaries for officials not involved in wildlife conservation. Sen stated that what money does get through for wildlife conservation usually shows up about halfway through the fiscal year.

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FOREST LOSS: THE COST OF DEVELOPMENT

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¶ 6. The State of the Forest Report notes that between 2003 and 2005 India lost over 700 sq kms of forest cover while over 600 sq km of healthy forests have been reduced to degraded forest despite GOI policy, in effect during the same period, to increase total forest cover until one-third of India's landmass was covered by forest. At present, India has 20.6 percent of its land under forest cover out of which only 1.7 percent is categorized as dense forest and 10.12

NEW DELHI 00000614 002.2 OF 002

percent as moderately dense forest. The remainder is considered degraded forest. Moreover experts believe the loss of forest cover is substantially more than what is indicated in the State of the Forest Report due to the fact that GOI figures include ecologically questionable monoculture plantations as forests. An article in the Times of India noted that if the monoculture plantations were removed from the calculus, forest loss between 2003 and 2005 would exceed 6000 sq kms.

¶ 7. The vast majority of the forest loss noted in the State of the Forest Report is due to increases in infrastructure development and mining activities in forested areas, including in legally inviolate protected areas. While the MoEF is required to approve Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and green light only projects that are within environmental regulations, the rules are routinely flouted in the name of development. EIAs are often fraudulent but approved anyway, one such case which was reported in the national press involved an EIA for a bauxite mining operation in tropical Maharashtra State lifted directly from a mine located in Russia. The EIA described the vegetation as being predominantly a mix of spruce and birch which while prevalent in Russia, are not in Maharashtra. Despite the glaring deficiencies in the EIA, it was approved by the MoEF. As a result there is little to no faith in the EIA process. Local communities feel short-changed by losing access to forest which also leads to greater human-wildlife conflict due to habitat loss.

¶ 8. In discussing the State of the Forests, Kanchi Kohli, an environmental activist, told Emboffs that between 2003 and 2007, approximately 311,220 hectares of forest has been cleared with MoEF approval for non-forest use. This amounts to 25 percent of all government clearances given since 1980 when the Forest Conservation Act was framed. Krishnendu Bose, a wildlife filmmaker, touched on the point saying he regrets the fact policymakers tend to equate forests with money. They see the forest only as land to be divided between development projects and mining concerns with the leftover to be distributed to tribal communities.

19. COMMENT: The Tiger Census and the State of the Forest report are both indicative of a malaise that runs throughout the country when it comes to wildlife and forest conservation. Although it is broadly agreed that tigers require inviolate areas free from human habitation, very little sincere efforts have gone into creating such areas while a great deal of mining, development, and poaching has occurred in supposedly protected areas. Despite over 35 years of official conservation efforts embodied in the launch of Project Tiger in 1972, State Forest Departments have not managed to successfully relocate most communities, nor have they managed to help communities have a stake in saving the forests. However, the ten fold increase in the relocation package for families living in protected areas is a good sign that the GOI is finally willing to take on this sensitive task. Whether the money is in fact used for its intended purpose remains to be seen. END COMMENT.

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